DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 319 699 SP 032 290

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TITLE An Essential Role of In-service Programs in Education: Empowerment and Participation.
PUB DATE 19 Nov 89
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual "Showcase of Excellence in Staff Development" by the National Council of States on Inservice Education (San Antonio, TX, November 19, 1989).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Advisory Committees; *Decision Making; Elementary Secondary Education; Governance; Inservice Teacher Education; *Participative Decision Making; Planning; *Policy Formation; Program Development; *Teacher Participation

ABSTRACT

Teacher empowerment means that teachers participate in policy decisions and have real decision-making responsibilities in the direction of their own professional activities. A description is given of an intensive 2-week, 5 hour per day instructional and workshop summer inservice program. The primary objective of this program was to develop an organizational framework for faculty involvement in developing a policy for a program for the gifted students of a small school district. The conceptual framework was designed as a hierarchical structure comprised of six working committees. While this appeared to be a normal administrative schema for decision making via a committee design, the structural and procedural format for the committees was unusual. A description is given of the structure and function of the six committees, how they arrived at recommendations for action, and how they interacted with each other. When this participatory organizational model was intact, the proposed gifted program was the topic of deliberation and debate of 95 percent of the faculty of that school district. (JD)

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AN ESSENTIAL ROLE OF IN-SERVICE PROGRAMS IN EDUCATION: EMPOWERMENT AND PARTICIPATION

by

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Paper Presented at the Second Annual
"Showcase of Excellence in Staff Development"
by the
National Council of States on Inservice Education
at
San Antonio, Texas
November 19, 1989

Note: Forthcoming as part of the published Proceedings of the National Council of States on Inservice Education in ERIC Clearinghouse on Teacher Education.

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AN ESSENTIAL ROLE OF IN-SERVICE IN EDUCATION: EMPOWERMENT AND PARTICIPATION

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It has always been my understanding that the primary purpose of in-service educational programs was to provide a service that would be both beneficial and unique for the teacher in the sense that this service would otherwise not be provided in the normal intra-institutional framework. If my understanding is reasonably accurate, then at least one aspect (perhaps the most important) of all in-service educational programs would be the development of a sense of empowerment within the teachers as they relate to the educational system, to educational institutions, to their own school, to their profession, to their classroom and to themselves.

Empowerment, in this sense, is not the same thing as acknowledging the de facto direction that already exists in the system. Empowerment is, in our programmatic effort, a deliberate attempt to provide teachers with the right, the resources and the responsibility to make sensible decisions and informed professional judgements that reflect their circumstances. Sometimes empowerment gets confused with the drive for power of a countervailing nature as John Kenneth Galbraith explicates in his most recent book, The Anatomy of Power.(1) And, sometimes empowerment gets confused with laissez-faire administration in which teachers are free to do whatever pleases them. However, with empowerment (as we attempt to service it) teachers must be given the responsibility to make decisions of a policy nature while at the same time these same teachers must accept this responsibility. Empowerment and responsibility must be seen as inseparable. In our view, empowerment has meaning only when it is seen as an inherent right and responsibility for teachers to participate in the decision-making process that prescribes purpose to their own profession.

Admittedly, much of today's talk about empowerment may well be misdirected. One problem is that the concept is value-laden. Much of this misdirection is related to connotations from the concept of power which create in all of us an automatic suspicion of those persons who have power over us. Consequently, administrators usually jump to the conclusion that teacher empowerment means a teacher take-over, i.e. teachers will now be telling everyone what to do and how to do it. Our in-service program has the primary purpose of demonstrating that this idea or misunderstanding is categorically incorrect. We emphatically stress that empowerment simply means participating in policy decisions, i.e. having real decision-making responsibilities in the direction of our own professional activities.

This is not a simple task as most, if not all, teachers are (and traditionally have been) isolated from policy issues and have been almost exclusively concerned with their own classrooms and their own students. To work toward a more participatory role for teachers takes time because it requires the development of a different type of organizational structure. Working collaboratively requires a new set of attitudes and procedures, i.e. ways have to be worked out that will give teachers and administrators experience in working together so they can begin to see how other professionals can be helpful, informative, cooperative and consensual. Astute administrators have always worked closely with teachers but what is now desperately necessary is this re-organization is a re-definition of professional roles. Typical job descriptions defining duties such that administrators do "this" (and are responsible for policy) and teachers do "that" (and are responsible for pedagogy) should soon become obsolete. But, as was mentioned earlier this will require a re-shuffling of both the institutional governance structure and the attitudes/behaviors of all members of the polity. Such a re-shuffle is surely difficult, uncomfortable and threatening to all concerned. Difficulty, however, does not imply impossibility!

So....let me posit as an example an organizational alternative that was developed during a summer in-service program and was implemented during the subsequent semesters while accompanying in-service programs and some consulting services were provided. A small high school in southern New Jersey with a district population comprised primarily of "blue-collars" with just a small smathering of "white-collars" wanted to begin a program in their district to serve their "gifted" student population. The superintendent of the school district contacted Widener University and several of our staff met with the superintendent to discuss reciprocal expectations and commitments. After all parties agreed upon the procedures and objectives, an in-service program began with school visitations and interviews with school personnel. These visitations and interviews provided the basis for the development of extensive needs assessments. An intensive two-week, five-hour per day instructional and workshop summer in-service program was designed and implemented to satisfy the needs assessment. The primary objective of this two-week program was to develop an organizational framework for faculty involvement in the development of a policy for a program for the "gifted" population of this small district.

The initial task faced by the faculty/consultants of the in-service program was to get the teachers to understand the nature of educational policy. In order to do this, we read and discussed in depth Donna Kerr's Educational Policy: Analysis, Structure and Justification.(2) Our in-service teachers/students seemed fascinated with this extremely elusive and rich concept.

They seemed absolutely surprised to find that from the larger and older Aristotelian concept of "politics" with its inherent "conflict of interests", a smaller concept of "policy" with its inherent "concert of action" is logically derived. And they seemed even more surprised to find that from this logically derived "policy", other concepts such as "polity", "polite" and "police" are subsequently derived and, therefore, provide some necessary conditions for the proper development of actual polices.

During the search for necessary conditions which are an implicit part of the concept of policy, the super-surprise occurred. We recognized and realized that from the "polity" that was derived from the "policy" came the notion of "agents". According to Donna Kerr, a policy exists when the following condition is satisfied, "some agents must be obligated to act in accord with some conditional imperative, i.e. do something in particular whenever specified conditions occur, in order to achieve some purpose".(3) When discussing this condition, Donna cites the need for these "agents" to be broken into different classifications - she distinguishes among authorizing agents (Board of Trustees), implementing agents (administration) and obligating agents (polity). She then argues that the more agents of different classifications involved in the policy-making, the more effective the policy will probably be. This argument seems plausible simply because more of the polity will be able to express their points of view and influence the actual policy.

Given this conceptual framework as the foundational basis of our organizational alternative, the following context for policy governance was developed:

Steering
Committee

Identification
Committee

Curriculum
Committee

Methodology
Committee

Policy Development
Committee

Policy Implementation
Committee

Obviously, this hierarchical structure is not unusual in itself. On the surface, it appears to be a normal administrative schemata for decision-making via a committee design. What makes this decision-making chart so unusual seems then not to be its organizational structure but the structural and procedural format for its committees. However, for this proposal to appear as a clear viable alternative to the typical administrative decision-making process in most typical educational institutions, an explanation of the structure and function of each committee is essential.

The Steering Committee is comprised of fifteen members with an equal number of administrators, department chairs and faculty members along with an equal representation of elementary, middle and secondary members. The initial function of this committee is to engage in an institutional self-study of the existing program for the gifted population of the district. The ultimatic function of the Steering Committee is to use the completed self-study as the basis for the development of institutional objectives for the proposed gifted program. These objectives will necessarily deal with differentiated curricula, specialized pedagogical methods and selected criteria for the identification of "giftedness". Consequently, the Steering Committee's membership is evenly divided into three subcommittees - the Curriculum Committee, the Methodology Committee and Identification Committee.

Each of these three committees is also comprised of fifteen members. As has been previously indicated, six of these fifteen members are from the Steering Committee. At least one of the members from the Steering Committee should represent the elementary school level, one should represent the middle school level and one should represent the secondary school level while at the same time assuring equal representation from the administration, departmental chairs and faculty members from the Steering Committee. The other nine members should be selected from among the general faculty but should also be equally proportioned from among the elementary, middle and secondary programs within the district.

The function of the Curriculum Committee is as simple as it is difficult. Its simplicity is based on the premise that "individual differences in ability and tenacity deserve/demand curricular differentiation".(4) Its difficulty is based on the problem of determining the precise nature of the differentiation. For example, should the curriculum be differentiated via acceleration into the next higher level course? Or, should the curriculum be differentiated by a more in-depth study (intensification) of the regular course? Or, should the differentiation follow from the development of special courses such as Critical Thinking and Creative Problem Solving?

The function of the Methodology Committee is similarly simple and corresponding complex. Its simplicity is based upon the premise that the implementation of a differentiated curriculum will dictate the application of different pedagogical methods. Again, the decision as to the precise methods that are most appropriate for the accelerated or intensified or newly developed courses is representative of the complexity of the committee's task. Difficult questions with which this committee will have to find answers will resemble the following: should the different methods follow from the implementation of a pull-out prototype? Or, from a cluster-grouping with enrichment activities? Or, from team-teaching of interdisciplinary seminars? Or, from....? That's the committee's function!

The Identification Committee's function cannot be said to be simple in any sense or in any context. The criteria or characteristics that will be utilized in order to determine "giftedness" are too complex and too controversial to assert that the committee's function is simplistic. The astronomical amount of difficult decision-making is sufficient to argue that the function of this committee is the most arduous of all the committees. Even if one agreed upon criterion for identification of giftedness is ability, the simple question as to "what constitutes ability?" is sufficient to arouse significant disagreement and deter the committee's deliberations which are specifically designed to select eligible candidates into the program in accordance with this criterion of ability! For example, should ability be based on achievement in course work and, therefore, determined by recommendation of the classroom teacher? Or, by achievement on standardized intelligence tests and, therefore, determined by professional testing experts at Educational Testing Service in Princeton? Or, are there other criteria (such as curiosity, 'criticalness' and/or creativity) that determine ability? And, if so, how can these criteria be measured or appropriately appraised? The function of the Identification Committee is undoubtedly one of the most important tasks of the alternative model.

The recommendations from each of these three respective sub-committees along with the objectives developed by the Steering Committee are then sent to the Policy Development Committee. This committee consists of three departmental chairs selected from among the membership of the Steering Committee, three instructional level representatives - one each from the elementary, middle and secondary - also selected from among the membership of the Steering Committee, one member from each of the three sub-committees and three members selected from among the faculty-at-large. The primary function of Policy Development Committee is to act as the "authorizing agent" for the development of a sound policy to guide the district's gifted program. Consequently, these twelve persons obligate themselves to direct another group of colleagues (the "implementing" agents)

to act in accord with the Policy Development Committee's conditional imperatives. By undertaking this obligation of development these conditional imperatives into a policy statement for the purpose of effecting a state-of-affairs which is consistent with all previous recommendations and doing so without violating any legal or ethical restrictions, the Policy Development Committee replaces the Superintendent and the Board of Trustees as the actual "makers" of educational policy.

Of course, the Board of Trustees has the final approving authority and the Superintendent along with his/her administrative staff will be responsible for the actual implementation of the policy. However, even at the implementation level, the participation of other segments of the polity is mutually beneficial. To this end, there is work for yet another committee - the Policy Implementation Committee. This committee is generally chaired by the Assistant Superintendent as the person generally charged with the responsibility for the overall educational program. The committee consists of three principals - one from each instructional level, three members selected from among the members of the Steering Committee and six members - two from each instructional level to be selected from among the faculty-at-large. The Policy Implementation Committee actually has a dual role. Initially, it is to determine what are considered to be the most effective methods to be utilized in the implementation of the newly developed policy. The latter purpose of the Policy Implementation Committee is to develop a list of procedural guidelines for the entire polity to use as their plan for their everyday practical application of the policy.

When this participatory organizational model was intact along with concurrent in-service instruction, the proposed gifted program was the topic of deliberation and debate of ninety-five (95) percent of the faculty of that school district. That's really participation! And, that's real empowerment!

ENDNOTES

1. Galbraith, Kenneth. The Anatomy of Power. Houghton Mifflin Company Boston, 1983.

2. Kerr, Donna. Educational Policy: Analysis, Structure and Justification. David McKay Company, Inc., 1976.

3. Ibid., p. 39.

4. Green, Thomas. Predicting the Behavior of the Educational System. Syracuse University Press, 1980.